

Big Food might be pointing way forward; Twenty companies have committed to sustainability

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Body

"The food system that we have built for the last century is a dead end for the future."

That stark but on-point message delivered to this week's UN Climate Action Summit in New York came not from a climate activist, but from Emmanuel Faber, the chief executive officer of Danone. Here was the CEO of a \$36-billion food and beverages giant (Activia, Danone yogurt, Silk Soymilk, etc.) acknowledging the global degradation of lands, the destruction caused by mono-cropping, the beginning of the end if the food industry fails to focus first on sustainability. "In a nutshell, we have broken the cycle of life," Faber told attendees. "And the missing link is the biodiversity in our fields."

Faber's address was timed to the launch of what a congregation of corporations has named the One Planet Business for Biodiversity coalition. Twenty of the largest food companies in the world have signed on, including Unilever, Nestlé and McCain Foods, accounting for \$500 billion (U.S.) in sales. "It looks big, but it's not," Faber said Monday. And that's true. The size of the global food industry reaches into the trillions.

It's an industry that has been driven by productivity and efficiency - a narrow bottom-line focus that is reaching that dead end.

The coalition's broad commitment is to put nature-based solutions at what Faber called the heart of corporate processes, strategies and supply chains: restoring soil health and focusing on regenerative agriculture, for example, and creating demand, as consumer product companies can, for forgotten crops and species.

On that last point, Faber was referring to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's release of last February which estimated that as much as 70 per cent of the planet's food demands rely on just nine plants. (Rice, wheat, potatoes, maize, sugarcane, sugar beets, cassava, soya beans and palm oil fruit.) "Forty per cent of our lands are already degraded," Faber noted. "We thought we could engineer the life that we needed and kill the rest in the fields."

The coalition makes this bold promise too: "We will answer the need for an urgent change in the way we address deforestation."

There are substantial reasons why consumers, and investors, should not dismiss such promises as just more talk. Danone has put sustainability at the forefront of its corporate goals with their One Planet, One Health mission unveiled two years ago. Transparency around reductions in carbon emissions, zero waste targets, sustainable supply chains, etc., has become part of the company's standard operating procedures. In January, CDP, the non-profit environmental disclosure program I have written about previously, stamped Danone with an "A" grade for action taken to address the climate crisis.

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Let's remember what was asked of attendees at this week's summit: to "show the way toward a full transformation of economies in line with sustainable development goals."

Faber's address went some way toward doing just that, at least in terms of setting a framework for progress. And then he went further: by the time of the UN's biodiversity conference scheduled for October 2020, measurable solutions and time-stamped goals will be set, he promised.

This isn't enough to assuage the heart-crushing thunder of activist Greta Thunberg. When she decried the collapse of ecosystems, the endless talk about "money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth," she was addressing global political and business leaders alike.

Refreshingly, Faber appeared to be listening. "I would like to beg you to listen to our youth," he said at the close of his remarks. "They are demanding this regenerative culture in the streets and beyond. I would like you to listen also to this inner voice in each of us that whispers life is sacred."

I have listened to a great many CEOs in my day, and I have to say, Faber came across as sincere and focused.

There's a pragmatic piece to this, too. If we accept the sense of urgency and the toll being taken by the current crisis, smart companies can see the horizon and know that it can no longer be business as usual. What is compelling about this initiative is that it is a co-ordinated corporate effort and one that promises to address broad policy considerations and cross-sector concerns. With luck, companies that have not joined the effort will see the benefit of getting on board, or the shame in not doing so.

Companies that aren't factoring in climate risk, that are not taking steps to address those risks, that are not being transparent in setting sustainability targets and measuring, openly, their progress are headed for the dust bin. Just a few short years ago that would have been a silly thing to say. No longer.

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